

Zhang Er
Trans. Rachel Levitsky

Puppet Bones

Are all they have. No righteous clothing, muscle nor fat. No skin blankets the stiff fragility. Mere decoration, by the mind of their creators. Exaggerated laughing or crying, brave words. For us they act out crimes or goodness, embarrassingly sentimental. They even die for us. Limbs dance an empty motion, as a dry thigh bone crookedly, awkwardly pushes to the front of the stage. No drama, only the fact of our inability to choose life or its complete retreat. Clay molds to head, willow branches tighten into fingers. Strung out skeletons offer men a chance to flutter away the frightful fertility of women; make human the shock of creation.

Lecture on the Mother Image

Interrupts the hot summer post lunch somnambulism of the museum tourists.
When is it best to become a mother, at fourteen like these Middle Ages, or today's thirty-four even forty-four? A particular consideration of respectable motherhood following the overpopulation that tightens habitable space until we ourselves pose the threat to ourselves.
Immaculate conception, then virgin birth removes mother from lust, then rational thought, then selfhood. She's forewarned of the crucifixion of her son, her fate of eternal loss, her position hanging, imposed from church walls, bleeding all over the world, face, breasts, palms, yet loving without fail. The pinnacle of maternal love. Not human, not sexual, untiring in self sacrifice, uncontrolled and irrational despite the augury of doom. Her appeal is in the beastliness coming from the face.

A father coaxes his son to be quiet for a few minutes on the opposite bench, letting mother take a nap.

Cleaning the Impossible

Cutting board after fish. Its head lies defeated in a plastic garbage pail, no final gasp for air. You, also pretty tired, are walking up and down, one hand pressing into the other one scraped by a fin. From death cut to neat piles of pear shaped flakes on a porcelain plate. Unbearably soft and pink and bearing a few strands of your blood. Reflective in the oblique morning light, sublime like a blossom that opens into a mournful smile. It's then you remember the high school best friend, her excitement at first menstrual blood. Why must one wash away fish in the morning? Why won't the morning wash it away? Sirens howl in the street as you chop with the dull side of a knife.
Pulverizing garlic with all your force. The garlic splashes, the knife turns sharply toward you.

The Pretty Men of Rome

Our hotel, the Hotel Raphael, borders Piazza Navona. It's there that Bernini's Fountain of Four Rivers excludes the Yangtze (Asia) and the Amazon (South America) and is charming nonetheless. We circumnavigate twice trying unsuccessfully to identify the goddess of the Nile.

Acrobats, violin players, ice cream stands, a candy booth, roasted peanut and popcorn vendors, portrait painters, silhouette cutters. We then pass the summer crowd under restaurant umbrellas, then an “English Speaking” travel agency, then emerge onto a wide boulevard. There sits Parliament’s office buildings with their stylized roman façades, rooftop decor, tall columns and the stairs where guards wear tidy caps, peakless and soft, and carry scary looking machine guns. They check each and every black sedan, in then out, ceremoniously saluting as they let pass. In and out, men with their briefcases, document folders, radiant health, perfect tan, wearing thin wool suits—high-end, fashionable, tailored to fit like a glove—and immaculately pressed dress shirts, and matched ties, socks, shoes, shiny coifed hair. No visible spot left unarranged, every one of these men looks and acts, postures, like a fashion model on a runway. They don’t look at women, they dress to impress men.

Sorrow for the women! No fans of this primped male beauty (what’s next? the growth of colorful feathers?), they prefer the men in silk shirts buttoned low, pale, a bit of tiredness in the face, sitting under the umbrellas near Piazza Navona sipping coffee.

Now On the Question of Inheritance

Worship the grandmother.
Despise the mother.

One Just Divorced and the Other Just Married

Driving together up the rambling, circuitous mountain road, passing trucks, one after another, hauling their heavy loads downhill. A maneuver that appears impossible. As it’s done, through thick and persistent dust. Their loads are rocks and boulders, as small as giant melons, as large as small hills.

This Carrara marble once defined the Roman empire, its wondrous palaces in light gray or pale brown. The women climb up another hill covered by trees to the surprise appearance of stark, snowy white marble cliffs standing erect before them. Tooth sharp peaks that bare themselves, that tower over and menace their watchful eyes in the glare of Roman sun, the cloudless blue sky. They tremble, speechless, forget the July heat. At the foot of the mountain, the quarry rumbles with activity, busy beyond belief – swarms of ants still trying to move the mountain after two thousand years.

When she picks up the rock here, she feels none of the expected smoothness and shine. That only comes later, after repeated polishing by water, and sand.

The miners’ town, Massa, uses marble to pave the road and build houses. On a street corner a tall pedestal faces the quarry. There stands a monument made of marble for the lost miners of past and future. Hearty and delicious cooking aromas confront their noses. Lunch hot at the only restaurant in town. The owner, who squeezes himself through the crowd to greet them, smiles radiantly as though he were their father greeting his daughters upon a homecoming. Red wine, cured olives, carpaccio that melts in the mouth, spaghetti with tomato and wild boar sauce, home baked loaves of bread. While eating, she chats with the owner who lingers at the table throughout their meal. She smiles, then notices everyone looking. At the two of them, the only women

there.

The Song

Out from an Orthodox Church a song carries, emanating from its glowing gold onion dome, from under the gold-trimmed and dusty cotton white curtain and out from the throats of invisible women. Iconic screens that are painted thick with red and gold, the Eastern Cross with a tilted foot rest bar on the bottom, lit candles blinking, lit candles tearing, the red drops dripping down, and a thin and tender female voice trailing, almost child-like as it drifts from the other shore as a white wave or mist, coming close, then closer, before slipping away. Crystal chandeliers light up, one tree after another, censers shaken amidst their smoke, priests in white or black gowns walk by erect and proud, the rustle, “shoo shoo,” from the kneeling sea of flowery scarves descending to the floor. The singing picks up, fills, weaves, flies away. The woman who created the gods kneels down at men’s feet. She made the man first, then for that man, she made the gods. With his defective imagination he turned her meditations into onion domes, candles, censers and crystals.

He turns them into a ritual, just so she’ll have to kneel.

Sacrifice

Instinctually we accept sacrifice; intellectually we deduce causal relationships. Plant the Beans/Harvest the Beans and Sacrifice/Succeed are two propositions that look similar, but their essences require opposite proof. Plant bean is the cause, harvest bean the result. But success is survival, not self-sacrifice. In the dark, some misty power beyond the rational, the controllable, exchanges sacrifice with success. In the service of clarity, religion and science each teaches their idea as the only one. We Chinese (who love ambiguity and vagueness) who claim a disbelief in the heart, openly mix the two together. Her endurance, the drudgery, bearing the weight virtuously while abstaining, while planting these beans, grows his career, social advance, wealth, not her fortitude. Constructing monumental arches honoring the virtue of chaste loyalty by widows, wives and virgins only celebrates the rewards of her sacrifice to him. Discounting her capability, putting her down, dehumanizing her, forcing her obedience is precisely that instinctual craving for sacrifice, psychological and practical. Blood splashes everywhere on the altar, cow’s blood, sheep’s blood, women’s blood. It’s splashing over poetry where we then have the phenomenon of women writing poetry but no female poet.

Memorandum for the Not Yet Born

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Xue Tao

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Li QingZhao

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Zheng Min

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Shu Ting

Lin Leng, Rong Zi

Zhai YongMing, Wang XiaoNi, Tang YaPing, Zhang Zhen

Zheng YiMin, Sun KangYi, Tong Wei, Xiao Jun

Ling Yu, Xia Yu, Wang Yu, Yan AiLin

Xin Hong, Hong Ying, Wang Ping, Ma Lan

Tang DanHong, Hu JunJun, Lu Yue, Tian XiaoFei *

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Hope that her labor harvests her fruit, and is not mere decoration on the enterprise of the others.

* a sporadic list of female poets spanning the past two thousand years in Chinese history.